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## THE REDISTRIBUTION OF THE CONTENT OF SOME HIGH-SCHOOL COURSES<sup>1</sup>

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We have watched with the fond eye of doting parents the rapid growth of the youngest member of our educational family, the high school. We have provided liberally for the young hopeful that he might sow his wild oats in freedom. We have withheld the rod of criticism. We have had pride in his lustiness. But recently we have become somewhat disturbed by the frequency and severity of his growing pains and of certain other disorders resulting from a too persistent indulgence in the unripe fruit of the tree of knowledge. It now seems time to establish a firmer discipline and prescribe a more scientific dietary.

To leave this somewhat impertinent figure of speech, we are beginning to realize that the high-school program is not fully meeting our expectations, that not all the changes in and additions to its content have made for efficiency in the solution of its problem—the training of efficient, straight-thinking men and women. This absence of desired results, however, is what might have been expected from the manner in which these changes have been brought about.

A few years ago, when instruction in the high school became definitely departmental, and when longer specialized training was being demanded of high-school teachers, there was a tendency to increase the work in the various departments and to make them college departments in miniature. As the social consciousness of the school was awakened, each departmental teacher tried to meet newly perceived needs by additions to his own departmental material, frequently with little regard to the development of other departments or to the peculiar limitations or adaptabilities of his

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English at St. Paul, July 9, 1914.

own subject-matter. Later, as still other social and economic needs were felt, entirely new departments were added to the school program, and new and untried content developed.

Two causes, especially, seem to have contributed to the defeat of the aim of the secondary-school program. In the first place, such changes as there have been have been made, for the most part, by departmental teachers with a limited view of the entire educational needs of the pupils. Administrative officers have too seldom guided the growth of the curriculum so that it might result in a consistent educational program. They have been content to look after the finances, keep the faculty in more or less good humor, and mediate between the school and the parent. Instead of building a course every part of which should have a place in the scheme of the whole, they have too frequently allowed the teachers to fight for departmental requirements and come to compromises based upon the personal strength of the various members of the faculty, not upon the value of the material in the education of the pupil. Departmental jealousy is a second cause contributing to the present confusion. This seems to be the result, in part at least, of the inadequacy of the training many teachers have received for their work. Of course we know that the tendency in the past has been to train specialists in curriculum content rather than specialists in education. The most hopeful sign at present is a widespread feeling that the entire content of the secondary-school program must be reorganized, that each teacher must give more analytic statement to the habits and reactions he may reasonably expect to train through the medium of his own peculiar subject-matter. The ideal situation will be reached only when the faculty become trained co-operators in the administration of the entire curriculum.

The papers and addresses before the various departments of this Association show that a few teachers are still unaware of the growth in the content and aims of departments other than their own since the days of their secondary education. Perhaps the most careful survey of the high-school curriculum being made at present is that of the Commission of the National Education Association on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. But a careful reading of the preliminary report of that Commission reveals,

what of course the members are thoroughly aware of, numerous duplications of materials and aims which need to be eliminated. The very difficulty of the task makes it attractive. The following suggestions are offered with no fatuous idea that they may be final, but rather with the hope that they may elicit constructive criticism. Not all the suggestions are equally important or equally well founded. One thing, however, seems clear; it is better to scrap the machine and build another from the débris than to make it more cumbersome by any attempt to splice the weak parts as they now stand.

The plan here outlined provides for the redistribution of the contents of the departments of English, history, economics, and art, including music. These departments are chosen because their contents have peculiar interrelations and duplications. At present English teachers are recognizing the value of teaching literature as an art. But the functioning which we desire to train through the art of literature is closely related to the functioning which the other arts are expected to train, and only slightly to that trained through grammar, composition, and literary history, which form at present the chief work of the English department. As the program is now administered, the training of the aesthetic faculties is divided between the teachers of art, music, and literature. The taste shown by many of our graduates is ample proof that such training as we now give is seldom effective.

English teachers are teaching a little about the growth and structure of language. This work would gain immensely in efficiency if it were freed from its present entanglements with composition and literature. It is more nearly allied to psychology and logic than to composition and literary history. English teachers are also placing emphasis upon outline of material, logical arrangement of observations, brevity and accuracy of statement in oral and written composition. But these things cannot be taught apart from valuable and accurate content. The notable work in vocational guidance through composition, or, better, composition through a course in vocational guidance, which is being done by the English department of the Central High School, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a striking lesson for us. The success of the

Grand Rapids plan seems to prove, what some of us have come to believe true, that a large part of what we are trying to accomplish through courses in composition can only be accomplished in content courses. The content handled in this vocational work is not at all related to grammar, or to literary history, or to literature as a means of aesthetic enjoyment. It is social and economic, and should be organized as a part of the social group of studies. It would appear to be more reasonable to transfer the composition work to departments with valuable content to be organized and expressed, than to confuse the work of the English department by bringing in material which functions in a way foreign to its other content, merely for the sake of vitalizing composition.

Again, the history department and the English department divide between themselves the task of showing the growth of the racial ideals of the English and American peoples. The result of this division of unit content is as deplorable as the result of the division of the training of the aesthetic activities.

This statement of present duplications and divisions, a statement which might be very much more fully elaborated if time permitted, indicates the reasons behind the proposed redistribution of these elements of the secondary program.

The suggestion is that this content be distributed to five groups, each with reasonably distinct subject-matter and aims. These groups may be called (1) technical, (2) historical, (3) economic, (4) aesthetic, and (5) special, in music, art, platform work, etc.

1. There is certain highly technical material in the high-school program which does not seem to relate itself readily to other content. There must be classes in music, drawing, grammar, letter-writing, the elements of sentence structure, etc. Such of this work as now falls to the lot of the English teacher would gain much by being freed from attempts to correlate it with composition and literature. The content of this group in no sense forms a "department," and it has no special unity. But grammar and drawing, for instance, are more closely related than grammar and literary art. Such technical material should be isolated, and attention should be focused upon it until at least its elements are mastered.

2. The second, or historical, group, and those following, present reasonably unified content with special adaptabilities. This group would naturally include, in the grades and in the early years of the high school, the stories of antiquity and of our own times, the biographies of great men and women, which give the groundwork of interest and information upon which to build the later organized consecutive courses in history.

These organized courses in the present curriculum include English history and American history. By the side of these courses are the English department courses in English literature and American literature. A few years ago these four courses were mere chronologies. All were informational primarily, and were taught from textbooks. But new materials and new aims and new methods have been brought into all this work. "My notion of a literary student," says Morley, "is one who through books explores the strange voyages of men's moral reason, the impulses of the human heart, the chances and changes that have overtaken human ideals of virtue and happiness, of conduct and manners, and the shifting fortunes of the great conceptions of truth and virtue." This is, perhaps, as good a brief statement as can be found of the aim of any intelligent course in the history of literature, as it is of the aim of any intelligent course in history. But if the growth of these ideals of the English and American peoples is to be presented effectively it must be done in unit courses. To divide this content between a course in history and one in literature is folly. Neither course can be effective. Or if either is effective, it necessarily duplicates the other.

The pupil who elects these four courses gives to them one-fourth of his time in the high school. In the stress of modern education for efficiency, it is difficult to justify this apportionment of time. We have tried to meet the situation by making them elective. But this content is among the most valuable in the high-school curriculum, and it should not be possible for any prospective citizen to spend his four high-school years without coming in contact with it. The solution of the difficulty is, really, very simple. Put all this work where it belongs, in the history group. Eliminate the useless material from the courses as now given, and

save time and gain in efficiency through unity and concentration. This suggestion holds for the first consecutive view of the English or the American people. The larger high schools and the colleges and universities will, of course, offer for those who are interested specialized work in the history of economic conditions, of government, of education, of religion, of literature as an art, of music, of art, etc. The point I desire to stress is that the first consecutive view of the development of either people should be a unit course, and it should be required of every student who completes the high school.

3. The economic group would naturally include the materials outlined by the chairman of the Committee on Social Studies. The history work of this group would be specialized into economic and commercial history which might serve as a foundation for the study of present economic and commercial conditions. This history should by no means be allowed to take the place of that outlined in the preceding group. The content and aims of the two are distinct.

I have never been able to see why those whose business it is to develop this economic work so persistently ignore material which is attractive and very important. I refer to the duties and rights of citizenship as defined by the statutes and ordinances of the various states and cities. We complain that such laws as there are relating to the management of public-service institutions, of bakeries, of dairies, of markets, are not enforced. Under our plan of local self-government the enforcement of these laws is impossible without an informed public. The school is doing little to make its pupils more effective citizens in these matters than their parents are. Of late we have given much time and effort to an attempt to free the public from medical superstition and the tyranny of the quack doctor. The school could well undertake the similar service of freeing the public from the tyranny of the lawyer. This might be accomplished through the medium of the economic group.

4. The materials, aims, and methods of the fourth group, which I have called for want of a better name the aesthetic group, are as yet but imperfectly defined. We have not adjusted our curriculum thinking to the aesthetic needs and possibilities of the pupils. The

present emphasis upon story-telling in the grades, upon drawing and music, upon oral and dramatic work throughout the school, indicates, however, that we are beginning to realize the value of the art impulse in education. Professor Charles H. Johnston says, "The incipient stages of the aesthetic experience, the natural and unrestricted approach to the beautiful, will soon cease to be the detached and exclusive privilege of those only who can defy school standards."

Too much of the discussion of this phase of education is still in the hands of those who are afflicted with the "artistic temperament." Aesthetic education cannot come to its own so long as its chief aim is thought to be harmonious color schemes in dress, or the "beautiful" in surroundings; so long as it is considered merely a provision for leisure hours. Skilfully directed aesthetic activity, we must realize, is the most direct means of effecting the "automatization of those fundamental activities, relatively few in number, which stand one in stead in either cultural or vocational crises." It is the normal process of unifying and mastering the spiritual forces of life, of establishing desired moral reactions. The "pattern" into which life experience is thrown through aesthetic activity is to our spiritual experience what the tabulation of observations is to the scientist, the fundamental process in control.

The material of this group would be the great literature, music, and art of the world. Special stress should be given to recent and contemporary material in these fields. This new grouping would free the director of the work from the present obsession of the English teacher, the feeling that a bit of literature which may have satisfied the aesthetic needs of a few of our ancestors a hundred or two years ago must of necessity be great literature now, and must be forced down the gullet of the pupil even though it is certain to give him literary indigestion.

The method of handling this material is determined by the aim, which is not information, but aesthetic functioning—the establishing of socially valuable reactions. In order to induce aesthetic activity it is necessary to keep within the potential range of the pupil, to use art which portrays emotions and experi-



ences such as he has had, in a form which he can understand. That this induced activity may be socially valuable, it is necessary to handle material which is related to the pupil's environment, physical, social, moral, or spiritual. Neither of these considerations requires the exclusion of all historical material, or the inclusion of all contemporary material. Much of the early literature and art of the race deal with social, moral, and spiritual forces which are a part of the environment of every child. But it is true that much of the material which is used at present in English classes, many of the so-called "classics," have no aesthetic value for the students. It has become customary for teachers of English to read papers before such assemblies as this in which they profess to have secured the desired results by means of this material. But the writer has his own experience with hundreds of pupils whom high-school teachers have considered their best pupils in English. These students, when they come to see the possibilities for pleasure and profit in other material, ask why they were made to do such useless work in the high school. And the answer is still to seek. Aesthetic value for the pupil depends entirely upon the experience which literature, or art, or music, may, through the administration of the teacher, induce. Literature which cannot be made to yield that experience is of no value here. What was valuable in former times, what satisfied the aesthetic needs of any considerable number of our ancestors, is certainly a valuable historical document, but it should be handled in the historical group for historical purposes and not be allowed to confuse the issue here. Perhaps no one distinction is more important than this in the handling of literature, or less recognized in the practice of the schools.

The aim and material of this group determine the method, which should be as unlike as possible the usual academic recitation. No "course" need be organized which all students must "take" and "pass," though this work should be a part of the activity of every pupil. No grade should be recorded. An elaborate system of grading, with averages and rankings, is an abomination anywhere, and it would be doubly an abomination here. Pupils should come to this work for the satisfaction of natural impulses in the same spirit in which they come to their playground activities—and they

should not be disappointed. It is no more impossible, though it is perhaps more difficult, to direct them so that they may master and enjoy the higher forms of artistic expression than it is to train boys to leave their crude natural games and enjoy the more complicated sports. It is only through this type of material administered in this manner that we can with any certainty form the taste of our pupils, lead them from the trivial and sentimental in their diversions, and establish desirable reactions.

The administration of the material of this group would not aim at technical dexterity in any of the arts. But the pleasure and profit to be derived from any art depend upon the complex of reactions induced, and this complex must be built up carefully and consciously by the teacher.

5. In the larger schools it is now possible to make provision for the early technical training of pupils who may be interested in the various arts. The road to success in music, writing, art, or platform work of any kind is long and the expense is heavy. Success is by no means certain. Many parents cannot afford to give children who show adaptabilities the long preliminary training which is necessary in order to judge of their probable success or failure. Early training in these lines is important. Few who wait until after their high-school days for the preliminary training in their chosen field can hope for success. We are meeting the vocational needs of our pupils along commercial lines. These other vocations are legitimate, they offer peculiar types of satisfaction to certain students, and they offer unlimited chance for growth. To these considerations add the peculiarly social nature of the service rendered and the long apprenticeship demanded by the arts, and it must follow that this work may claim a place in the public school. This is not a plea for the development of art schools as a part of the public-school system. It is not expected that the high school shall turn out artists. But it seems that the high school should give opportunity for special students to try themselves out sufficiently to be able to judge of their probable artistic and financial success.

The plan of distribution which has been thus briefly outlined provides for all the significant material in the departments under

discussion with a saving of time and a gain in unity of aim. Perhaps the most important result of the regrouping would be the disintegration of the incongruous mass of material now gathered into the English department. The only element of the present English work which has not been provided for is the composition. Of late the dreams of the English teacher have been nightmare themes with tongues of red. Our efforts to correlate composition and literature have failed. High-school classes conducted after the manner of college-composition classes have left us panting and calling for help. Oral composition has come to the rescue and still we do not accomplish the desired results. We have begun a strong plea for the co-operation of all teachers with the English teachers in the matter of "English." In our strenuous attempt to prove to other teachers that their work is inefficient unless they give due attention to the qualities in expression which we have been trying to foster we have proved that matters of outline, of clear and concise statement, of adequacy of vocabulary, are no more the concern of the English teacher than of the science or history teacher. In the *English Journal* for June, 1914, Mr. A. R. Brubacher has made convincing statement of this fact, though not precisely in these words. It has ceased to be a matter of the co-operation of other teachers with the English teacher in teaching English. It is seriously doubted if anything of value can be taught in any department unless the teachers give attention to these things. About as useless a bit of method as ever entered the schools is the method of requiring the English teacher to mark the "English" of papers written for other departments. The plan presupposes the vicious assumption that a paper may be good in history, for instance, and at the same time bad in English. Many teachers now recognize that their chief business is to help the pupil to organize his experiences with their subject-matter and express himself adequately—perhaps as many teachers in other departments as in English. And many teachers in other departments, with their unified and vital material, frequently teach composition better than we do in our composition classes. It only remains for us to admit that composition is not content for another group or for separate classes, but that it is a matter of method in all teaching.